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## VOX

Welcome to this our 5th birthday issue:  
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Chris Blackford/October 1990

This issue is dedicated to the memory of  
Angela Coyne

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editor/publisherdesigned  
and struggled with  
Chris Blackford

7

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If you find mistakes in this  
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that they are there for a  
purpose. We try to publish  
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and some people are always  
looking for mistakes.

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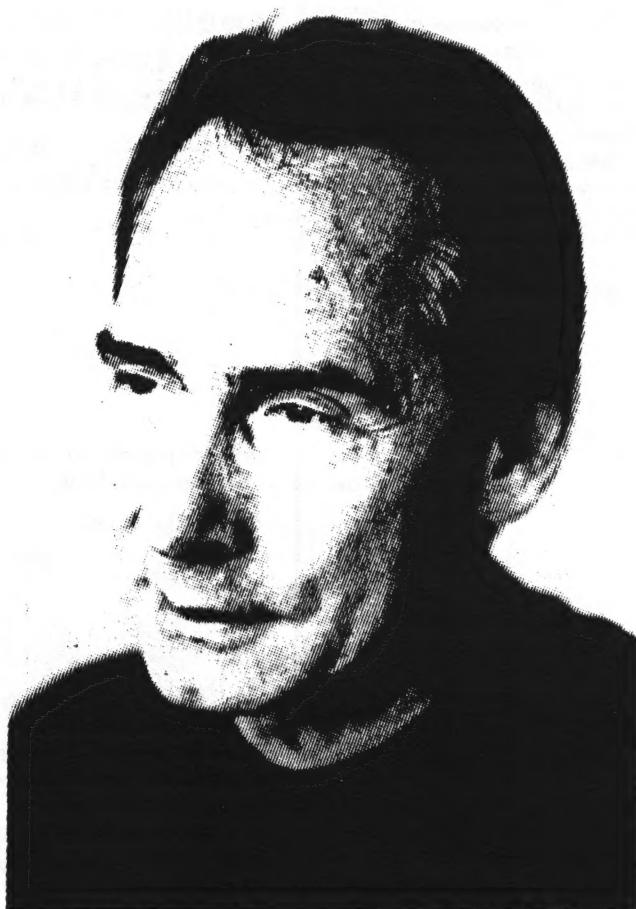
jon hassell  
all the raga

interview:

chris blackford

image:

christine alicino



**T**he Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu claims that the Western classical music of this century, dubbed 'modern' or 'avant-garde', has been largely unable to express the erotic/sensual aspects of human experience; instead, it has concerned itself with the head, the intellect, at the expense of those regions craving physical delight.

Like Takemitsu, American composer Jon Hassell (born 1937) is also an exception to the rule. Hassell is primarily a synthesist who has managed to weave together a variety of cultural traditions from East and West to produce luminous compositions that defy classification. But make no mistake, this is no smooth postmodern cocktail targeted at the New Age thirtysomethings with a taste for the exotic. Hassell's distinctive music may well be postmodern by virtue of its cultural eclecticism, but it's also the result of years of research and performance in areas as diverse as Indian classical music and Western minimalism. He has had to wait until the 80s for his music to achieve the wider recognition it deserves and this has been partly due to his association with high-profile musicians like Talking Heads, Brian Eno, Peter Gabriel and David Sylvian, all of whom have a similar bent for cross-cultural experimentation. Of course, he requires no one else's music to justify his own; his unique style of trumpet playing and intricate layering of acoustic and electronic sounds are bound to play an important role in the experimental music of the 90s.

*Let me begin by asking you to describe what you consider to be the significant points in your early musical development.*

JH Well, I had a normal musical education, a Masters degree in music, in composition. Then to while away my army duty I was in Washington with a lot of the special bands connected with the army. I studied musicology at Catholic University and went pretty far up to PhD. I was doing things like translating Gregorian chant.

After that I went to Europe and studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen for two and a half years. Then came my contact with Terry Riley and LaMonte Young, both of whom I played with. They introduced me to Pandit Pran Nath, an Indian clas-

sical singer. That began my most important *formacion*, as they say in French. I studied quite intensely with him learning raga, first vocally and then trying to transfer it to the trumpet. That's one of the reasons for the kind of sound I get. It has to do with trying to duplicate the melismas of classical Indian singing in an instrument for which that's not made. It requires this sort of backing away from normal trumpet technique. Those are the major points, I think.

**I have had a long love affair with the exotic. I mean, after all, I come from Memphis Tennessee. I guess that's exotic to some people. I've always been interested in the bright parrot's wing and the drum beat.**

*Can you remember who or what turned you on to non-Western musics and what you found particularly satisfying about them?*

JH This goes very far back. I imagine it was a friend of mine playing Ravi Shankar or Ali Akbar Khan when I was at the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester. I have had a long love affair with the exotic. I mean, after all, I come from Memphis Tennessee. I guess that's exotic to some people. I've always been interested in the bright parrot's wing and the drum beat. Other musics have obviously played a big part in my social life, my social listening, as well as in my actual work. That became a kind of nexus for me when I started to think about the contradiction that I was working in one way, let's say a kind of white-on-white minimalism, and then at night when it was time to turn down the lights and light a candle and get sexy, it was Brazilian music or something of that sort.

Eventually the equation came round to me: why does music get separated in this way? It's not separated this way in India where there are rhythms that you can groove to, whether internally or externally, and certainly in Indonesian music and African music all those things exist, the structure, the variation and the social aspect of it, all in one

bundle. Judged against that, Western music looks a bit pale and sick because its head is separated from its body and, as we all know, or should know, this is an unhealthy state of affairs even in the individual. So, it was through my study of raga and these melismatic forms, this calligraphy in air, which the Kirana style is, and of which Pandit Pran Nath is such a great master, that my knowledge of other musics opened.

*The term 'World Music' has been applied to your music. It's also become a pretty fashionable and effective marketing term used to sell a considerable range of musics. As a result, I must say I have some misgivings about its appropriateness to denote a particular attitude to music, a particular genre. What are your thoughts on these matters?*

JH We're living in an age of mass, and every term becomes fashionable or unfashionable and has connotations, etc. There are always things like that to deal with, and I think you're quite correct in calling it an effective marketing term. One should probably think of that and the dread New Age appellation as also being a marketing term as well as a stylistic description.

Everything is personal. In some sense there is no general. Everything is individual. The way that I arrived at the kind of music that I do relates back to the business of trying to resolve the night-time/daytime aspects of personality and self. In another sense that means looking outward and seeing what every environment has created and then one can extrapolate from that to other kinds of environments that actually don't exist, or might have existed. That's one of the motivating ideas in what I do. I'm always happy when there's no geographical reference, when the music is not site-specific – it's not African or Indonesian, it's become something which is quite indefinable. I feel it's most successful when that happens.

There are lots of versions of 'World Music' around. The simplest example would be where one is making a piece out of this person from Persia, another piece with a person from Morocco, or another piece with a person from Brazil, etc. We're living in a multitrack age, so why not have such a thing. But from my point of view it's not as challenging as actually trying to integrate and under-

stand... to get some sort of personal, kinky view, if you will, of how it is that a particular type of music relates to its indigenous environment, and then trying to create a fantasy environment and a corresponding music. Naturally, none of the fluff and froth condiment versions of World Music are interesting to me.

**Let's look back at Duke Ellington, for example, to remind us all of the first fusion of European and African which took place in the Americas, and remember his sophistication in terms of harmony and instrumentation, his approach to European instruments, etc.**

*In that case, I wonder whose work you do feel has successfully combined elements of non-Western musics with Western musics?*

JH Well, I could jump around and make an end-run here. Let's look back at Duke Ellington, for example, to remind us all of the first fusion of European and African which took place in the Americas, and remember his sophistication in terms of harmony and instrumentation, his approach to European instruments, etc. Also, I think Miles Davis did a beautiful sort of world urban music, particularly in records like *On The Corner*, and in the early 70s with tabla and sitar and electric things buzzing around. He used them in ways in which they merged. One might think, here's just another layering, another condiment, another sprinkling, but when you think about the fact that where he's starting from already represents a version of the first implosion/explosion of the European and African musics, then what's added to it at that point becomes, for me, a very powerful mix.

*During the early 80s Brian Eno became perhaps the most famous regular contributor to your work (*Fourth World Vol 1: Possible Musics* (1980), *Fourth World Vol 2: Dream Theory In Malaya* (1981), *Power Spot* (1986)). What sort of similarities do you see between his attitudes to composition and your own?*

JH Certainly there are similarities between our attitudes. I don't see... there are some obvious connections depending on the focal length of the lens you're looking through. Obviously we have more in common than I have with Madonna, let's say. I'm sure there are other things to say about this, but I often draw a blank when I'm given a question like this because I'm so shellshocked from having people assume that he's responsible for my music or my sound. These are people who are clearly unaware of the processes involved and the chronology involved. So, perhaps I give a shorter answer than I might if that didn't exist.

*In 1987 you wrote Pano Da Costa (Cloth From The Coast) for the Kronos Quartet (see the Kronos Quartet's White Man Sleeps (1987) Elektra/Asylum/None-such 979 163-1) Do you have any other chamber pieces as yet unrecorded?*

JH No, I don't as it happens. I mentioned earlier that I went through the whole academic music education and when I arrived at the study of raga I found the oral-aural form. That caused me to adopt a special attitude to notation. In other words, I only use notation as a kind of shorthand or guideline. I depend on there being aural literacy. So, the Kronos piece was a big chore to have to do because of the notation. When I come against a chance to play or to sit down and write, I normally choose playing.

**I'm always happy when there's no geographical reference, when the music is not site-specific – it's not African or Indonesian, it's become something which is quite indefinable.**

*In 1988 you made an album called Flash Of The Spirit which arose out of your live work with the group Farafina. In the sleeve notes you refer, in passing, to a "record concept". What had you in mind here?*

JH The record concept basically means that once the cuts have all been done I usually try to find a bell-weather, a touchstone. That sometimes comes from the literary side of things, in this case from

the book called *Flash Of The Spirit* by Robert Farris Thompson. It also refers to the packaging at that point, though of course it goes deeper.

For me there are only perhaps one or two pieces on that record which were successful in the way that I like for things to be successful. Let's say that while there are many things on the record that are enjoyable, the one that I'm most fond of is the last piece, one called 'Masque'. The process of composition was basically since they're a balafon band what one can do tuning-wise and still have the balafon sound was a bit restricted, so they're not on the record as much as they are in the concert. I think 'Masque' has the right combination of things going on, their underlying structure and what I created on top of it. Some of the mixes done by Daniel Lanois keep Farafina more or less intact, the others which were done by Brian Eno are more reductive.

*Finally, and bringing us up to date there's the new record City: Works Of Fiction (1990). To me it sounds like something of a departure. For a start there's a bass in there which gives some of the tracks a funkier, sexier feel than previous work, which relates back to what you were saying earlier about the need to unify the cerebral and sensual aspects of self and personality which usually get separated in Western music. Perhaps you could say something about the motivating forces behind this record?*

JH I've been working with a new band, four other musicians from Los Angeles. Their names are Dan Schwartz (bass), Greg Arreguin (guitar), Jeff Rona (synthesizer) and Adam Rudolph (percussion). I've been playing with the same people for many years, Jean-Philippe Rykiel and J A Deane have been the most prominent musicians. This new group, though, is an attempt to look at urban music. Certainly, I can't say that the whole is this, but there were trace elements of my listening to Public Enemy and rap groups and being enchanted by their spontaneous combustion of this new form that relates so much to tribal African music, let's say in terms of its storytelling, its social function and the way it was made to be heard off a beatbox. One could look at that urban Afro-American music as being another kind of World Music. Therefore, why should it be left out of the equation. So, I've been

trying to play with a group that had sounds that I had consciously left out in the past - funk bass, wild guitar. I'm attempting to integrate that into this particular phase of my thinking. Although it's a bit of a struggle I'm very encouraged by what happened in Brazil. We did two concerts, one in São Paulo and one in Rio. I think there's something there. R

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Vernal Equinox (1977) Lovely Music/LML 1021  
 Earthquake Island (1979) Tomato 2696122  
 Fourth World Vol. 1: Possible Musics (1980)  
 EGED 7  
 Fourth World Vol. 2: Dream Theory In Malaya  
 (1981) EGED 13  
 Aka/Darbari/Java (Magic Realism) (1983)  
 EGGCD 31  
 Power Spot (1986) ECM 1327  
 The Surgeon Of The Nightsky Restores Dead  
 Things By the Power of Sound EMI/Intuition  
 Flash Of The Spirit (1988) EMI/Intuition 1C 066  
 7 91186 1  
 City: Works Of Fiction (1990) Land LANDC11

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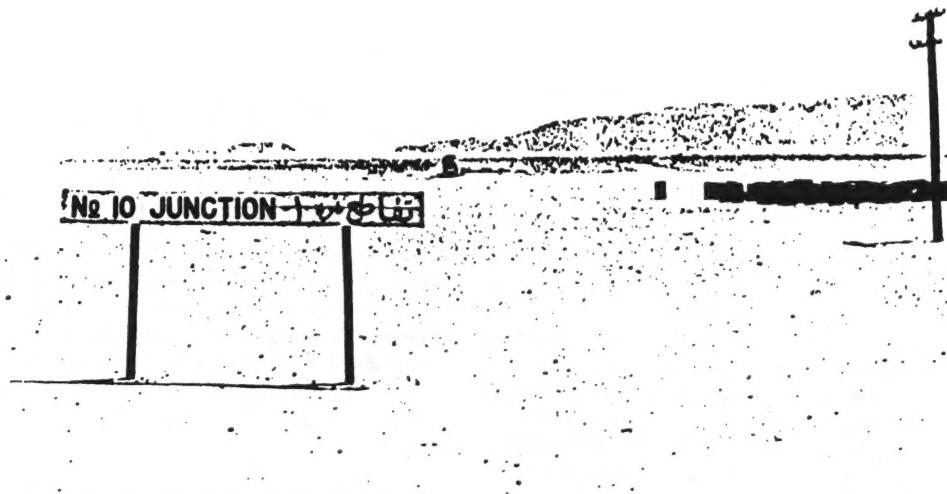


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# SUDAN DIARY



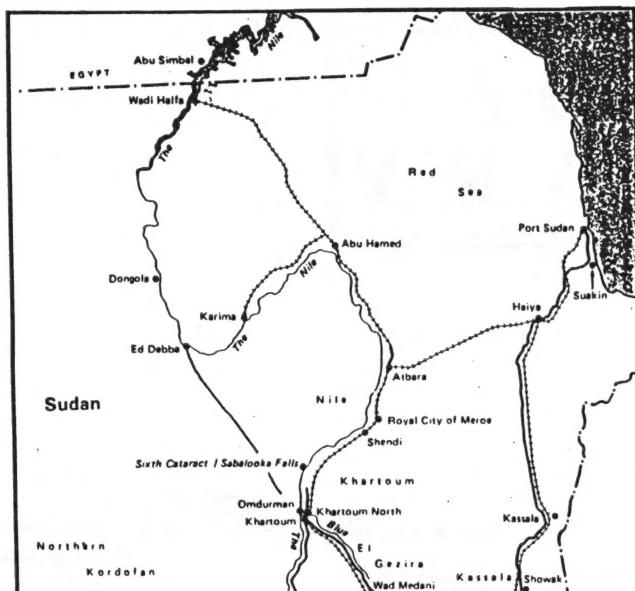
Mary Dawson and Jane Stephens recently returned from an expedition to the Sudan. There, they and four colleagues had been testing the feasibility of solar cookers in a region seriously affected by the growing problem of 'desertification': the expansion of desert land, partially caused by the excessive collection of firewood and its transformation to charcoal for domestic cooking. The two pieces that follow, however, are not about alternative energy; they are personal reflections based on diaries kept during the expedition.

## PART ONE

Journey Through A Harsh Landscape  
Mary Dawson

THIS is an account of a part of the expedition concerning our train journey from Khartoum to Wadi Halfa. Distanced from the experience, the journey now seems like a series of images and ideas, vivid and lasting in their impression upon me. I hope that through this short account it is possible to convey some of my feelings during the trip and the thoughts they provoked.

Throughout the journey I was constantly aware of my privileged status as a white European traveller, and of my position as tourist and voyeur of a different and very much harder way of life than my own. In our first-class compartment, which one



of my colleagues' acquaintances had secured, we were cut off from the full force of the discomfort associated with travelling in a Sudanese train. For me, the temptation aroused by feelings of guilt and helplessness, was to remain shut away from these surroundings. As on other occasions in Khartoum and Cairo, when for the first time in my life I was personally confronted by the pain and misery of poverty, my immediate reaction was to turn away and switch off in deference to my own feelings of sensitivity. On the train to Wadi Halfa I recalled our discussion about humour in the village where we had been staying. In answer to the question put by a local, "What kind of things do you find funny?", we had replied that we thought that it was a British characteristic to laugh about sad or sometimes tragic situations. Our hosts had replied, "But how can you laugh at poverty or murder?"

## SPACE...

Another powerful impression gained during this journey was the feeling of space and openness in the Northern Sudan. Having had only a limited experience of travel before this expedition, I suddenly acquired a completely new perspective of space and distance. Our train journey across the

Nubian Desert — an area probably larger than the whole of Western Europe — made me realise what a narrow and isolationist outlook I had acquired living in Britain. Here in the middle of an enormous desert I found myself fearful, but also excited to be travelling on the brink of something far larger than I had ever experienced or ever conceived of.

## GORDON'S LAST STAND

I was also made aware of the arrogant and often contemptuous way I had been educated to think of the Third World; not only was it a mass of countries about which it was possible to make sweeping generalisations, but also a part of the world that was only worth considering in terms of Western involvement. Our short stay in Fateeh had made me aware of my limited knowledge of Sudanese history — limited indeed to an absurd romanticisation of British intervention and Gordon's Last Stand. No attempt had been made to consider the Sudanese people for their own worth: hence my embarrassing ignorance of a major world religion — Islam — and language — Arabic. I feel sure, especially since talking to other people after my return, that this ignorance is wide-

spread in Britain, and not simply the result of a personally limited education. However, it seems that awareness or admission of such ignorance is much harder to find.

We spent our last night in Khartoum on the station platform. I recall lying back and looking up at the moonlight filtered through a palm leaf room and being quite oblivious to the struggle for third class places outside the station. Only occasionally was our calm disturbed that night by the gentle thud of men climbing the fence nearby and landing with their luggage on the platform — an attempt to ensure their place on the morning train.

### THIRD CLASS

Although waking early, we missed the main activity of the morning, and in search of toilets and water we caught the tail-end of the queue for third class travel. A surge of people had already flooded on to the platform and completely filled every available space in the third-class carriages. It was a striking contrast to our sedate stroll down the platform to find our first-class compartment. In Egypt, and Khartoum itself, I had already been surprised by the numbers of people packed into public transport, but this was without parallel. A few miles from Khartoum, men climbed out of the train and on to the roof. They were prepared to endure the heat and danger of this form of travel in preference to the discomfort inside. At every stop men and women climbed out of these carriages to enjoy some space and shade for a few moments. Yet, despite our shock at these conditions we were able to stretch out and sleep in the relative luxury of our compartment.

Even though I had read about the train journey in our *Nile Route* guide book, I was not prepared for the experience. Within minutes of leaving Khartoum station we were coated in dust. Sand poured through the train window, creating a dust screen in the carriage, cigar-smoke thick, and filling every breath with the taste and feel of grit. Along the route the many villages we passed reminded me of Fateeh: mud huts, black goats, a few green trees and, in between, a sparse open landscape with bare brown bushes, a cluster of goats grazing beneath the pale cloudless sky.

At every village where we stopped, women and

children walked alongside the train with small tins and buckets, and occasionally a sheepskin slung across the shoulder, selling water or sweet *chai*. In Shendi women stopped outside first-class compartments to sell woven dyed mats and baskets, small coloured flags and basic clay pots. Amidst the general activity centred around — and probably dependant upon — the arrival of the train, black goats with flapping ears lumbered along the station platform.

### SILENCE...

In the early evening the silence and the strange pink desert light outside were a contrast to the cramped conditions and crying children inside. Outside our compartment families were crowded into the corridor space without food or water; mothers tried to comfort their tired and thirsty children. Unable to switch off the misery and think of something else, I felt powerless, helpless and guilty. We stayed awake for many hours discussing our feelings. Selfishly I began to wish the crying would stop so that I could fall asleep peacefully without feeling that other people were suffering close by.

The further north we travelled the harsher the landscape became. I could not help remembering Sadr-Al-Dud's tales of the hardship of desert life, of ripping open a camel's stomach in search of water. After Atbara, where to our amazement the drinking water gushed from the tap a brown colour, we entered the final and most daunting stage of our journey, aware that we would not be able to obtain food or water until Wadi Halfa.

For miles and miles either side of the train, smooth cream sands stretched in to yellow-black hills, which were reflected by lake-like mirages. In the early evening huge black birds of prey were sitting ominously on telegraph wires, or flapping slowly above the train. And through all this our train rattled along — a strange intrusion in the deep silence.

Long before we reached Wadi Halfa the lights of the small town could be seen. After stopping to drop off families in the neighbouring villages, we pulled slowly into Wadi Halfa station, and despite all the comforts and privileges of first-class travel, we dropped almost exhausted on to the soft sands.

The journey from Khartoum to Wadi Halfa is approximately 500 miles.

## PART TWO

A Sudanese Hospital

Jane Stephens

DURING our stay in the Sudan I fell ill twice. The first time I had malaria and amoebic dysentery and the second time my gut became infected with two different amoebas. On the first occasion we were in Khartoum and my colleagues fortunately arranged for me to stay with friends; thus, I was able to receive the necessary medical care, have access to 'proper' toilet facilities and obtain sufficient fruit. For four days I was allowed fluids, water and squeezed fruit. It was not until I fell again that I realised how lucky I had been the first time.

## COMPLICATIONS

The second time, we were in Wadi Halfa, a small Sudanese town on the border with Egypt. Having been refused permission to travel on the ferry across Lake Nasser by the ferry's medical officer (who did not know how to administer an injection), it was decided that I should be taken to hospital; this, however, was not without complications as five miles of desert lay between the port and the hospital. It would have been impossible to walk, but it was just about possible to get transport since petrol supplies in this area were scarce. Fortunately one of my colleagues knew the customs officers at the port who readily agreed to take us to the centre of Wadi Halfa; from there we managed to get someone to take us to the hospital.

Admission to the hospital was relaxed and straightforward. I was simply helped to the same bed where I had been examined two hours earlier. There were no forms to fill in and no routine examination to try to isolate the disease: just a cheery welcome from the ward nurse and patients. It was here that I spent the next five days.

The whole experience had a profound impact upon me. Firstly, the hospital itself came as a shock. I was reminded of George Orwell's incredible account of a Parisian hospital in the mid-1940s. Nevertheless, I had always assumed that such conditions were a thing of the past and that now

all hospitals had to be equipped with basic toilet facilities, a clean bed to rest in and an adequate supply of medicine. Here, I was forced to realise the grim reality of poor medical facilities and what they mean for the patient and relatives.

The hospital had three wards: a men's ward, women's ward and a two-bed surgical ward. These were housed in three separate decrepit flat-roofed buildings, reminiscent of the neglected prisoner-of-war camps one can see on the south coast of England. Everything was in a poor state of repair. The beds were old with broken springs which allowed the thin mattresses to ease through the remaining holes, leaving the occupant at an uncomfortable angle. Of course, there was no air-cooling system, not even a fan to afford some relief from the oppressive heat. This caused particular suffering to the woman in the bed next to mine, who was not permitted to have more than one cup of water per day. Obviously she rapidly became dehydrated. However, it was not only she who suffered; the heat made everyone very uncomfortable. I must confess that until then I had always assumed that people who lived in very hot countries somehow adapted and did not notice the extreme heat.

## SQUEAMISH

There were tremendous shortages of equipment, though there was sufficient to carry out simple operations like appendicectomies and tonsillectomies. More general things like glasses to drink from, bowls to be sick in, and bed pans were all in limited supply. As a result relatives or friends helped the patients by bringing in things from home. Sometimes, however, patients, having no alternative, were sick on the floor and often had to venture out to the toilets on the other side of the courtyard irrespective of health or the heat of the sun.

The toilets were not a sight for the squeamish. They were situated in two sheds: one for females and the other for males. Both sheds were partitioned into three cubicles, each with its own door. Behind two of the doors was something like a plywood dais and beneath it a bucket. In both toilets the plywood had been broken in several places which made it very difficult to position oneself.

Some had obviously not succeeded. Urine and excreta soaked and covered the platform. Moreover, the buckets underneath were overflowing. Not only was the stench overpowering and the heat intolerable, but the whole cubicle was swarming with flies, and it was impossible to prevent them settling all over one's body. Sometimes one would find used dressings on the floor which had doubtless fallen off a patient who was too ill to notice. Behind the third door there was a shower; however, this only ever seemed to provide a mere trickle of water making it next to impossible to wet one's body, let alone wash.

**Needless to say I was finding these conditions very disturbing, but so too were the Sudanese patients and their relatives. They all agreed that the prospect of hospitalisation in such a country was daunting.**

During my stay the beds were never made nor the linen changed. In fact, when I got into bed on arriving at the hospital it was exactly as the person before me had left it. There was neither the staff nor the facilities to wash the linen. Likewise, the wards were rarely cleaned and like the toilets there were many flies which provided a constant irritation, not to mention an obvious health risk. On one occasion a fumigator was obtained from the hospital store and immediately the flies began to fall on to the beds and floor. It took several full dustpans to clear them. This proved to be a futile exercise as very soon the ward was once again teeming with insects. Needless to say I was finding these conditions very disturbing, but so too were the Sudanese patients and their relatives. They all agreed that the prospect of hospitalisation in such a country was daunting.

Remarkably, despite the nature of the conditions these Sudanese people were not complaining. Like all Sudanese people we met, they had a positive outlook and were thankful for what treatment, however limited, they were receiving. This

is not to say that they were resigned to appalling conditions; although they have hard lives coping with what we would consider to be a primitive lifestyle, they find it no less unacceptable and unbearable than anyone else faced by such hardship. Their homes are clean with simple but hygienic washing and toilet facilities.

The one doctor who was responsible for all the diagnosis and supervision of treatment came daily but at no set time. He worked very hard, dividing his efforts between trying to treat people in this dispersed desert community as well as in the hospital. In addition, he was responsible for the administration generated by his work.

## WEALTH

There were no regular mealtimes; even though the hospital was supposed to provide food this never happened. Relatives of patients brought food, and a relative of the woman in the bed next to mine brought food for me and the colleague who was staying with me. The generosity at mealtimes was genuinely moving. Traditionally Sudanese share each meal. There are no individual plates or portions, just communal bowls from which everyone helps themselves using bread as a utensil. Initially I found it difficult to relax at mealtimes. I even suggested we had our own plates because I was worried that I might take more than my share. On reflection, I cringe at my ignorance.

Hardly a moment passed without someone coming to see how I was. Yet, I was not singled out for special attention. Each visitor would talk to most of the patients. This can only stand in stark contrast to my experience of English hospitals; anyone who has stayed in one will surely be familiar with the loneliness and embarrassment experienced at visiting time when for some reason relatives or friends are unable to come.

These kindnesses made my stay at the hospital a much more pleasant experience and helped compensate for the state of the hospital itself. Despite the fact that the Sudanese people are deprived of many material things, one of my lasting memories will be of their personal wealth. They are a warm, friendly, inquisitive and intelligent people. R

---

john cooper clarke

**the bard lets loose**

i n t e r v i e w :

chris blackford



**W**hen the Sex Pistols were the purulent embodiment of punk, the poetry of John Cooper Clarke was its literary sensibility. Within an atmosphere heady with peroxide and the fetishistic *bricoleurs* of street style, Cooper Clarke fashioned a delightfully intimidating poetic stance. Not since the days of the dada provocation-performances had poetry been allied to such visual and aural excess. There was a time when many punk scenes up and down the country boasted their resident poet(s); few, however, are remembered, let alone read. There has not been a rush to anthologise this type of poetry, which is a pity because some of what was printed and performed was amusing and quite resonant.

In the late 70s Cooper Clarke occupied a middle-ground (not mainstream!) in punk, somewhere between the decidedly avant-garde tendencies of Genesis P Orridge's group Throbbing Gristle and the tabloid offence of the groups that managed to penetrate the sanctity of the charts. His most impressive non-poetic achievement is to have brought poetry to an audience not necessarily predisposed to it, and thereafter held its attention. This he did by the blistering pace of his delivery and his corrosive wit.

A typical Cooper Clarke poem is nothing if not humorous. In 'Readers' Wives', his observations of the low-budget/DIY end of soft pornography, the tone is a mix of mockery and pathos: "cold flesh the colour of potatoes/in an instamatic sitting room of sin". Later, in the final stanza, the ambiguous tone is most evident: "wives from inverness to inner london/ prettiness and pimples co-exist/pictorially wife-swapping with someone/ who's happily married to his wrist".

Monsters from outer space, health fanatics, kung fu lunatics, populate the lighter side of his work (his whimsy is reminiscent of Roger McGough); the other is an urban nightmare strewn with burnt-out prostitutes, savage hoods, men obsessed with their virility and wives "dreaming under the driers/eating sleeping slimming/ac-cording to what is required". Nowhere is this forbidding mood more poignantly captured, and with such bleak humour, than in the long 'Beazley Street'. An eye for sordid detail focuses on a scene of decay and deprivation, where "light bulbs pop

like blisters/the only form of heat/where a fellow sells his sister/down the river on beazley street".

A similar vein is pursued in one of his few prose pieces, '1984', a work broadcast on a BBC Radio 1 programme heralding that Orwellian year. In it Cooper Clarke is more pointedly political than usual. Through the impoverished protagonist, Clint Hargreaves, he specifically condemns rising unemployment, YOP schemes (as they were then called) as cheap labour, and DHSS (as it was then called) spies (Cooper Clarke is from Manchester). Apart from a VCR and one cassette, our hero's only pleasure seems to be obtained from a bottle marked Benolin Expectorant. "There was only one thing worse than agoraphobia," Clint concludes, "going out."

Exit the Honey Monster, enter Johnny Clarke...

**People criticise the way poetry is taught in schools, but I don't see what the alternative is. It's the nature of children to think they know everything when they don't know anything. I think there's a type of person that goes for poetry.**

*It seems to me that a lot of young people develop an aversion to poetry because of the rather staid manner in which it has been served up at school. What was your experience of poetry at school?*

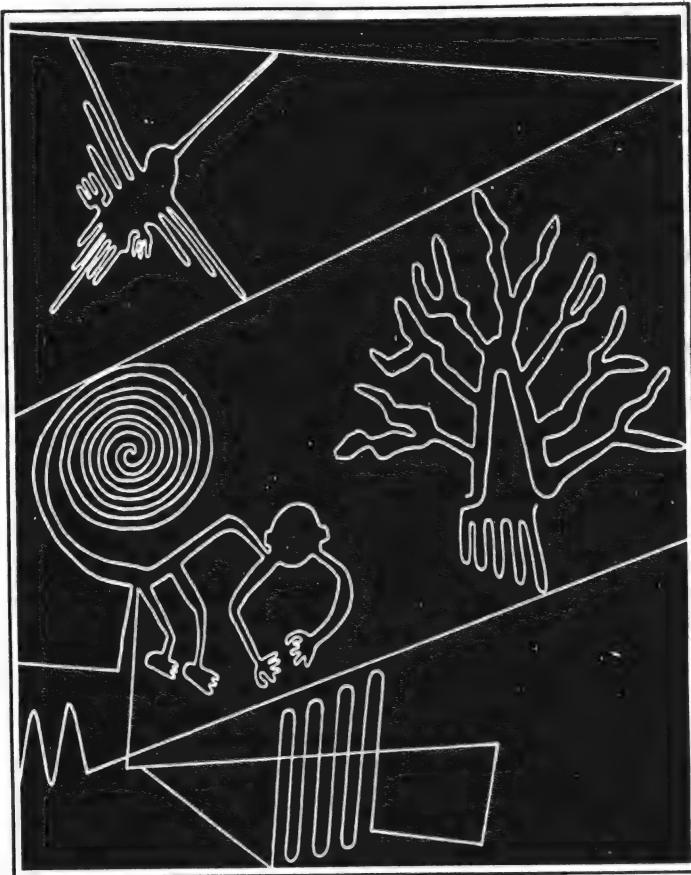
JCC I enjoyed poetry at school. Shakespeare, Coleridge, Shelley in particular. I used to enjoy the 19th Century poets. We had a good poetry teacher. She was very much like Jean Brodie. She was from Edinburgh.

*Did you write any poetry at school?*

JCC Yes, I did. But to return to your earlier point. People criticise the way poetry is taught in schools, but I don't see what the alternative is. It's the nature of children to think they know everything when they don't know anything. I think there's a type of person that goes for poetry.

*And you were someone who was naturally drawn to it?*

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JCC I suppose so. But the teacher was very good. She used to pick out good poetry and literature for us to read.

*You mentioned a moment ago that you liked the 19th Century poets, do they still influence the way you write today?*

JCC They do, yes.

*Even though you tend to be regarded as an 'urban poet'?*

JCC Well, the style of my poetry is quite traditional. My use of rhyme, for instance. The kind of relish of scientific lingo and specialised jargon. I think that poetic impulse is something that is apart from things that change. The impulse doesn't change. For example, Mark Smith of The Fall, although he writes about urban subjects he's got that original approach to language that is eternally poetic.

*You also acquired the title 'punk poet'. Is that a fair description of the type of poetry you were writing about a decade ago?*

JCC Yes, I would say so. I fancied myself as a kind of media manipulator in those days. I felt that through punk I could reach more people and do bigger venues and make more money (laughs).

*But punk was supposed to be about getting back to basics, simplifying things. I wouldn't call your poetry basic or simple. There's obviously a lot of intricate wordplay and subtle use of metre.*

JCC But punk was also concerned about sophisticated urban subjects. It wasn't really simplistic, it was only the form that was simplistic – the three chords. In that way it was deceptive. If you look at all the leading personalities in punk, Johnny Rotten, Billy Idol, Lou Reed, Patti Smith, Iggy Pop,

they're all very literate people.

*The working-class, proletarian bit was just an illusion, then?*

JCC Yes, it was just a romantic bit of slumming (laughs). Punk was definitely an art school phenomenon, very definitely.

*Your decision to work through the record medium was an unconventional route for a poet.*

I fancied myself as a kind of media manipulator in those days. I felt that through punk I could reach more people and do bigger venues and make more money.

JCC Yes, I suppose so. But the record medium was quicker. The returns are quicker. The results of what you've done get realised quicker.

*Were you at all concerned that the record buying public might expect a rapid outpouring of poems in the way that songwriters are expected to keep churning out the songs?*

JCC I don't see why the poet shouldn't be expected to, but whether they can keep up the quota is open to debate. There is no reason why poetry shouldn't be tainted by the marketplace. I think it causes an interesting tension when you've got commercial concerns impinging on internal topics.

*Would you say that you are trying to popularise poetry?*

JCC Oh yes, certainly.

*So how do you feel about the fog of elitism that generally surrounds poetry?*

JCC Well, if that sort of elitism wasn't there my appeal wouldn't have anything to stand opposite. I like that sort of elitism in poetry, I think it's attractive. Poetry should attract rather than come on strong. It should be something that doesn't change, the nature of it doesn't change over the centuries.

At first, the established poets thought I was just a geezer with a dirty mouth, but when they saw what I was doing they realised it was poetry.

*Have you had to tailor your work to reach a wider audience?*

JCC To an extent. It's hard to see where one finishes and the other begins. I write loads of poems but only a few get selected to be featured in the act. I've got loads that I would put in a book or on a record, but for the act you've got to assume that all the people who come to see you have got a short attention span. You've got to keep them interested.

*Is that one reason why you've worked with a band in the past?*

JCC Not really. Sometimes I work with a band, sometimes without. It's like having different repertoires. I write some poems with music in mind and some without. I've been working with a group which is straightforward rock 'n' roll called the Imperial Bandits. But that's another persona entirely (*laughs*). That's hipshaking Johnny Clarke.

*It's been some time now since *Ten Years In An Opened Neck Shirt* was published. Do you have a new book ready?*

JCC Yes, there will be a new book when I can get a deal for it, but it's going to be a limited edition, really kind of precious. Yellow paper, purple ink on yellow paper with a hard cover embossed with gold flowers. I'm going to include the seafaring piece 'The Wreck Of The Prima Donna' and new work which is kind of 19th Century stuff. It'll be a mixture of poetry and prose and hopefully some illustrations of a PreRaphaelite nature. It's going to be very unhealthy, very morbid. You know, flowers, death, girls, dead girls holding flowers. Not really John Cooper Clarke's popular stuff. R

#### POSTSCRIPT

All that currently remains in print of John Cooper Clarke's work is one compilation LP entitled *Ou Est La Maison De Fromage?* (Receiver Records, 1989) and the aforementioned and highly recommended book *Ten Years In An Opened Neck Shirt* (Arena, 1983) which contains many of his best-loved poems.

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# Somewhere Else

## Chris Blackford

I can picture one of them lighting a cigarette, drawing heavily on it and then the smoke rushing from her mouth. She is putting the lighter back into her anorak pocket, patting it as if to check that it's still there, over and over, like some people check windows are closed, gas fires and taps are turned off, televisions unplugged. She's got problems, but that's probably one of the least of them.

She is saying something to another woman, younger, prettier, who has just arrived on the scene, wearing a mini-skirt, high heels and a leather jacket. Whatever it is she has said, it has the younger, prettier woman in stitches. She turns sideways, going into a crouch which shows off her marvellous thighs - the envy of any ballet dancer. Her long, dark hair which is usually pinned up, swings around in front of her face before it is hurled out and backwards as she straightens.

In summer, when the weather was fine, I'd see as many as four of them out there parading up and down by the 'phone box. Then, they'd wear as little as they could get away with without the locals kicking up a fuss. Most people turn a blind eye or, like me, watch from behind net curtains. There have been prostitutes here for years, I have been told. Local industry in motion. The next genera-

tion comes home in school uniform, waiting for the day when they'll be whisked away for half an hour in BMWs, Volvos, Audis for the price of a tandoori and a few lagers.

They say the first few minutes are the worst when you're hoping to God that the pick-up isn't a headcase. After that the professional touch takes over. The two in the back held her still. The fat one with the beard pulled tighter on the tie around her neck, while her friend sucked off the driver. She felt her life ebbing away, she said; her bulging eyes were fixed on the label across his knuckles. Pierre Cardin. She followed the flowing signature as though it were a path winding to a precipice from which she'd plummet. The bruises were still there beneath the jaw: I'd touched them with my lips thinking they were lovebites.

Gordon was near me when I woke. He was cocooned in the maroon sleeping bag I had lent him the night before. I could smell smoke, the smoke from the bonfire was still on our clothes. I was cold. The room was large and difficult to heat. I should never have rented it. I was in a hurry to get a place before the new term started, and when I'm in a hurry I usually make mistakes. I'm one-paced. Slow and ponderous,

# lips thinking they were lovebites.

people keep telling me. And so I quicken up, and that's when I make mistakes.

The previous tenant was a woman in her early forties, I should think. I saw her once, and once was enough. She was as vain as hell with a back complaint that stopped her going out much. There were snippets of her life-story scribbled on the 'phone directory: divorce, slagging off her ex-husband, sexual hang-ups/fantasies, things like that. She left a copy of *Playgirl* in the bathroom cupboard with a note stapled to it: To Whom It May Concern. All men are wankers — like me!

I could feel her presence when I was alone there, which was most of the time. I could smell the stale odour of her cigarettes in the curtains, imagine the smoke drifting upwards to the stained ceiling while she cursed her life away. She was a bad influence on the place. The air felt heavy with her resentment. I repainted the walls and doors in an attempt to exorcise the place of her. I should have moved out, but you know how it is when you've got things on your mind. You keep saying you will but you never do. Naturally she left without leaving a forwarding address for the mail. Most of it was junk. The personal stuff I put in a large envelope and took to the nearest post office. I wanted nothing to do with it. I'm not the sort of person who'll read other people's letters or diaries, no matter how much I dislike them. Sometimes I think I probably fancied her. I thought of her a lot, but that's what she wanted. I searched the place for clues as to where she might have gone. I found nothing. I saw her once and that was more than enough, I suppose. Ridiculous fantasies like these keep you going when you're low.

**D**espite outward appearances Gordon was a man much troubled by dreams. To look at you would have thought him the epitome of equanimity. In the time I knew him I never once saw him lose his temper with a child, nor panic in the face of adversity — and there were many such opportunities in a single day at that place. He was a valuable ally, willing to give advice based on twenty-five years experience in the profession, and willing to sit through my moans and groans. Looking back on it I suppose he was

something of a mentor; he certainly nursed me through some testing times. For this, at least, I am forever in his debt. I am, as they say, eternally grateful. Thank you, Gordon.

He kept a dream diary for the visits he paid to a counsellor once a month. Once, when he was pretty drunk, he read a section from it to me about a recurring dream which particularly bothered him.

It began with him climbing the narrow, wooden staircase which leads to the staffroom in the main block. This, he would carry out in total darkness — not an easy task given the gradient of the staircase and the shallowness of the stairs. On each visit his fingertips scoured the wall at the foot of the staircase in search of the light switch he knew was there but could never find. As he climbed he was aware of the claustrophobic dampness in the air. Also, there was the acutely unnerving sensation of being observed from above whilst, at the same time, knowing that the darkness prevented this. Reaching the summit he would find the staffroom lit meagerly by a 40 watt bulb inside an angle-poise lamp. The chairs which, under normal circumstances, were arranged in rows facing each other, had been stacked haphazardly against the walls. In the shadowplay caused by the lamp, he said it was like being surrounded by mountains.

Keeping to the left of the room he would cross the sodden carpet to where the lamp was situated on a low table. There was a 'phone and a few directories. Although the 'phone had been disconnected, its presence signalled the constant threat of a possible interruption. When he was not thinking about the body in the middle of the room, his attention would be focused on the identity of the possible caller had the 'phone been connected. Next, by directing the lamp at the wall opposite the door he had just entered, he was able to see the rows of pigeon-holes attached to the wall. His own pigeon-hole was labelled: Gordon Bennett, subtitled, Head of Maths. From it he took several galvanised nails, and a claw hammer from the darkness above the pigeon-holes.

During the next phase of the dream he remembered being alternately naked and then weighed down by heavy clothing, causing his body tem-

# bruises were still there beneath

perature to fluctuate quite dramatically. He denied feeling sexually aroused, though he did admit to having an erection on a number of occasions. He laughed when I asked if nocturnal emission had taken place.

The body in the middle of the room was wrapped in tarpaulin throughout the dream. Nevertheless, he was convinced that it was female. Moreover, it exuded the odour of something metallic, something vehicular. Underneath the tarpaulin he imagined the polished surfaces of a rigid shell hiding fleshy inner parts; perhaps a bit like crab meat, or tangy and juicy like kiwi fruit. The body made him want to struggle and, at the same time, give up, surrender to its horrifically beautiful power. He trembled at its side in anger and in reverence.

"Can you imagine what it must feel like to a drive a nail through something human?" he said. I could not. This he would do, working his way down the body, puncturing the tarpaulin. The body, however, did not writhe in agony or cry out, as he had hoped. "As usual," he said, "I am left feeling exhausted and humiliated. It's as though scorn, escaping like some noxious vapour from the holes in the tarpaulin, is filling up the room and I am being slowly asphyxiated. When I wake I am usually close to tears. All I want to do is 'phone in and take the day off which, as you know, rarely happens."

**G**oddammit, Debbyanne, you look so young and so PreRaphaelite, is what I should have said. I can see her now over by the window staring at the women across the road. She is wearing my striped Habitat dressing gown which had begun to fray at the sleeves.

"I could never do that," she is saying, "not in a million years, not even if you paid me to." And now she is laughing, that cute little cackle I found so enticing. She is walking towards me, away from the window. The room smells vaguely fragrant of one of those air fresheners — alpine-something-or-other. There were toast crumbs in the waistband of my paisley pyjamas; the sound of DIY banging came up from the flat below. "How much would you pay for me if you had to pay for me?"

This is heaven, I am thinking. But for how long? It takes two to build a relationship, and only one to tear it down.

Gordon is waking up the children, who are stretching out their limbs on the playing field, waiting for their kit to tumble dry.

"These are dark times, Michael, you shit-for-brains."

"Thank you, Gordon. Your place or mine?"

When the kit is dry our work begins. Would you say there is too much grass here, worn around the goalmouths? Back passes were always my Achilles Heel. Whether to come for them or let the ball do the work? I could never decide.

He has raised his baton, this time without anguish. There will be other times when you will take the time off instead. These people are holding us by the ankles over moral barrels. You can take only so much of the blood rushing to your head, then you snap like an ice cream wafer. It will be easier than you thought possible. Some get away with it, and some don't. Maybe you will suppurate. Would a trial suppuration be a better way to go, I wonder.

"Now you're getting personal, Michael, and you should know how little I like personal questions. Don't push me too far, or I'll turn green like that thing on ITV and there'll be hell to pay."

"These are dark times, Les. Dark as the stairs we have climbed to get here. "Who changes the light bulbs around here?"

"Everybody and nobody, Michael."

"Les?"

"Yes, Michael. What is it?"

"I'm not sure. I keep smelling sandalwood. You're not an old hippie, are you?"

He took out a wallet from the bedside cabinet. For a moment I thought he was going to pay for what he'd done. He laughed aloud when he realised what I'd been thinking. He was not the man I wanted him to be, but he was okay. He had a piercing gaze that I found discomforting, but you can't have everything. He handed me a photograph.

"Who do you think this is?"

"You, obviously," I said. "Credit me with at least an ounce of intelligence."

"That's right. It's me when I was in the Army

## smoke from the bonfire was still

Catering Corps. Wouldn't you say I was the handsomest thing you'd ever seen in an apron?"

Once a butcher always a butcher. I should have guessed, I was thinking, when I stared at his hands on top of the duvet. Only a butcher would have hands this clean.

Then he started telling me about when he was a policeman, but I was remembering this orange spacehopper I had as a kid, years ago. I called it 44 because it had the number 44 stamped above its eyes for no apparent reason. I left it in a yard in Highcliffe where we stopped for Sandwich Spread and minestrone soup. We drove away down the main street full of tourists in sun hats and white shorts. About an hour later I realised my mistake. I was pleading with my dad to turn back, but he said he wasn't going to waste the petrol when another kid had probably picked it up by now. Alan, my older brother, was laughing because how could anyone become attached to such a ridiculous piece of inflatable rubber. I wanted to cry. Mum handed me a sweet which I threw out of the window. I wanted to cry, but all I could feel was panic, a huge wave of sickening panic flattening all the sand castles on this beach inside my chest.

Les was the one doing the talking, but it was Gordon's voice that I could hear.

"Remember Michael, for I have sinned. You are the adult and they are only children. Whatever they may say or do to you, remember this. Do not court popularity or try to be their friend. They will come to you only if they choose to. Nothing you can say or do will alter that fact. Their backgrounds are not yours or mine. Some of them are rude and smell and lack the sophistication we would wish for them to have. Most of them would rather not be here, but they still have pride. Space is what they need, it's what they feed on. More good advice could not be crammed into one sentence than is there."

**H**ere we are then. Gordon and me in this marketplace, stark bollock except for these huge velvet codpieces. I was annoyed because people were passing our stall and nothing was being sold. He was trying to explain to me that what we were doing was a bit ahead of its time, that the kids weren't quite ready for this

sort of thing just yet. We had a heap of these things on a table in front of us: paisley-patterned, corduroy, some with sequins sewn on. Debbyanne passed in front of the stall and picked up a corduroy one with tiger stripes.

"How much?" she said.

"How much?" I asked Gordon.

"How much do you think it's worth to be demirep?" he said.

She was wearing my dressing gown, the one fraying at the sleeves. I was trying to see inside it, but couldn't.

"Demi-what?" she said, looking at me.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"The kids need the seal of approval, Michael," Gordon was saying. "They need to be told, assured that it's okay to experiment from someone they respect. A star, let's say."

"It's for my dad," she said. "He's a tiger, make no mistake. I'll be late, I must go. I'll see you Monday, Room 4." She blew a kiss.

"What does he want with it?"

She shrugged.

He would be all over her. I would find that out after it was too late. The whole thing would start to look like a miserable documentary, a tacky fiction put out by an aspiring author trying to make a name for himself, resorting to cheap thrills and shock entertainment from the lives of those too poverty-stricken to know or care what art was all about. Ugliness goes so far and then it becomes beautiful again, etc., etc.

I entered her, slowly, thinking it was for the first time. Sweat dribbled down my back. There was DIY coming up from the flat below, where the bloke used to rev up his motor bike every Sunday morning. She had hold of my arms. I saw her wince, I think. But she moved with me until it was all over.

Am I in love, I thought. No, just running over the same old ground worn at the goalmouths. Some are lucky, and some are just born losers.

"I had in mind someone big, a star, let's say. Someone of the magnitude of a Leapy Lee or a Partridge. What is that chap's first name? People always say: 'Where is he now?' He came from nowhere and went back to it in no time at all. Better to burn out than fade away, they say. A short ac-

## fantasies like these keep you

celerated life is what you had, Michael. You burned bright and were snuffed out."

**D**ad, when I arrived, was at the electric keyboard he and mum had recently purchased.

"It's this one, here," she said, pointing to one in the catalogue which had the bust of some composer on it. She ran her finger along the text beneath the photograph. "It's a Bontempi."

"Is that good?" I asked.

"It's good enough for what I want it for," dad chimed in. He flicked one of the switches above the keys, causing a snappy percussive beat to rise above his voice. "Name that tune!" he shouted.

Mum looked at me, laughing. "He thinks he's . . ." Her voice was lost in the noise coming from the keyboard. She waved her arms at him. The noise stopped almost immediately. Dad pulled an apologetic face.

She had her arms folded around the catalogue, a light blue cardigan draped over her shoulders. "Come on, let's sit down," she said. "We haven't seen you for a long time and there's plenty to talk about."

Les came up behind me, laid his hands on my shoulders. There was so much I wanted to tell him, so much to unburden without being a burden, but the man so loved the sound of his own voice. I asked him the sort of questions I wanted to answer myself, and he told me next to nothing. Later, when he started calling me his friend and wanking over me, he told me nearly everything.

The steel in his eye runs like solder; the tears roll gently down my shin into the carpet of an attic flat somewhere in the north of London. Too much vodka turns him into a sentimental old fool. He's a great big vulnerable old Hector who works in a job centre and likes to see justice being done. His heart is with the underdog, really. He'll do anyone a favour if they can put up with his self-opinionated bullshit. Still weeping for the grandad he lost to carry him back over the sand-dunes, across the beach, down to the fishing boats in the harbour, rocking and groaning. The dark tide brings talk of sea adventures, voices bobbing on the salty air. In a remote Scottish town a child's imagination works

overtime. Under a heavy eiderdown dreams unwind like the endless sticky thread inside a golf ball.

**V**ery early one Saturday morning, Les took the bodies he had been keeping under the floorboards out to the bonfire on the patch of wasteground behind the house. There were about six in all, including mine, cut up and jumbled together in bin-liners. He made several journeys, throwing the bin-liners into the space at the heart of the bonfire. Eventually he covered it over with the last of the pieces of old furniture that had been dumped there. Before he lit it, he threw on a couple of old tyres to hide any unwanted smells.

He stood back and watched the fire grow in intensity. There was still no one about, though an hour or so later some of the local kids came to watch. They asked him what was making it sizzle and pop. He told them that his freezer had packed up and that he'd had to throw out some meat that was going off. In time they drifted away.

The fire burned all morning, through the afternoon, and by early evening there was just a pile of ashes. He raked them over, crushing any fragments of bone that still remained with the back of the rake. He told himself that it was all over, that it was all behind him, now. Once, turning on the radio at random, he had heard somebody say: If you don't know where you are going, you will end up somewhere else. This time he would put some order, some discipline back into his life. I've become a cynical, middle-aged fart, he thought, who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. He went back to the flat, poured himself a drink and put on a record. R

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*rubberize* v. treat or coat with rubber.  
*rubbernick* n. (Amer. slang) an impulsive person.  
*rubber* adj. like rubber.  
n. 1. waste or worthless material.  
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